

# URBAN DISTRICT COUNCIL OF CHESHAM.

## ANNUAL REPORT OF MEDICAL OFFICER OF HEALTH.

TO THE CHAIRMAN AND MEMBERS OF THE  
CHESHAM URBAN DISTRICT COUNCIL.

Gentlemen,—I wish in this my first annual report to direct your attention to a few particulars of the topographical, geological and general characteristics of the neighbourhood so far as they bear on the health of the residents. Firstly, the town is situated 300 feet above the sea level in a long valley running nearly direct from north to south in the Chiltern Hills. The whole district consists of valleys and hills, some parts being 600 feet above sea level, consequently the air is very bracing and invigorating. The soil is chalk with upper layers of gravel, or in parts clay. Springs are very numerous, and when above the latter formation, dampness of the soil results; though, as a rule, the ground is dry and porous. In the town itself the subsoil water is at some places very near the surface, less than six feet, and there is no doubt it would be a great advantage if a free exit were given to the waters of the Chess and less was dammed back.

The disease most favoured by dampness of soil is phthisis. The local death rate from this disease is .9 per 1,000, that is nearly one per 1,000, and although this is below the general average of the whole country (1.4 per thousand) it is not so low in proportion as other diseases are.

From many points of view Chesham and neighbourhood is eminently suitable for residence. Within easy distance of London, its bracing air, picturesque scenery, general low death rate, and freedom from infectious disease offer advantages not possessed by the lower-lying localities nearer London.

For many years past there have only been one or two cases of scarlet fever, and diphtheria and typhoid fever have been rarer still, and although in 1896 a severe epidemic of measles pervaded the district, only 8 deaths occurred from it. The general sickness rate is also very low.

Out of the 118 deaths occurring in the whole year no less than 30 were of persons over 65 years of age. Seven of these were between 65 and 70, sixteen between 70 and 80 and seven were over 80 years of age—striking evidence of the longevity of the inhabitants and the healthiness of the locality.

The parish of Chesham contains with Ashley Green 12,745 acres, the population in 1891 was 8,018; at the present time it is about 8,950. There are 1,870 inhabited houses in the parish. Owing to no records as to age and sex distribution being available from the last census, many deductions as to the healthiness of the locality are prevented. There is, however, a large proportion of young adults working in boot, brush and woodenware factories and there are over 1,700 children attending school.

During the 10 months I have been your Medical Officer there were 198 births (106 male and 92 female) giving a birth rate of 26.5 per 1,000 per annum, the lowest for many years.

The deaths numbered 100, a rate of 13.4 per thousand per annum—a very favorable one as the general death rate is 19.5 per 1,000. Had there been no epidemic of measles, whooping cough and influenza, which caused in the whole year 21 deaths, the death rate would have been 10.8 per 1,000 per annum—an exceedingly low one. The deaths of infants under one year of age numbered 26, being at the rate of 136 per thousand per annum to number born.

The child mortality or deaths under five years of age was 4.8 per 1,000 per annum.

Twenty-three deaths were due to zymotic disease; measles caused 18 deaths, whooping cough 8, diarrhoea 4 and influenza 3—a zymotic death rate of 3.08 per 1,000 per annum. The death rate from measles and whooping cough was 1.07 per 1,000, each owing to the severe epidemic to which I shall presently refer.

During the year 24 cases of infectious disease were notified: Five of erysipelas, one of diphtheria and eighteen of scarlet fever. The cases of scarlet fever, with the exception of an imported case in May, began in October. There were two in New Town, two at Botley and nine at Whelpley Hill. In December four more cases appeared in New Town. The source of contagion in nearly all the cases was obscure. There being no Isolation Hospital all these cases were treated at their own homes.

Although at the date of this report you have hired a house for isolation purposes, I am sure it will be wiser to erect a permanent structure available for all cases of infectious disease.

A hastily constructed iron building might meet an emergency, but they are the most expensive in the long run, being very apt to get out of repair. A permanent hospital of five beds, with provision for extension would be a good investment.

Vaccination is a dead letter in the parish, and should cases of small pox arise they would, if not at once isolated, lead to a widespread outbreak.

During the past year proceedings have been taken to separate the hamlet of Ashley Green from Chesham, and for it to form a part of the Amerisham Rural District. This hamlet is about a quarter of the total acreage of the parish, although the population of it is only 340 persons. An important question which has arisen in consequence is the danger to the water supply of the town. This, as you are well aware, is obtained from a spring in the chalk and the flow of water being in a direction north to south, there is a danger of its being injuriously affected by leaking cesspools from that part of Ashley Green parish situate on the Vale-road. To obviate any danger of this kind I would advise you to allow houses situated here to be connected with your sewers, and as water is necessary for the efficient working of the sewerage system, with the water mains also.

Another matter bearing on the health of the people living on the hills around the town to which I must refer, although reluctant to do so on account of its having, unfortunately, become a party question, is the very unsatisfactory state of many of the houses with regard to the water supply. The town supply is excellent, but those living on the hills beyond the mains of the waterworks have to depend on rain water collected in tanks or ponds. At all times the taste of this water is unpleasant, as, owing to the roofs of the houses being covered with vegetable growths, both living and dead animal and vegetable organisms abound in it. Before it can be used it requires to be both boiled and filtered. It is obvious that a labourer earning from 12s. to 14s. a week cannot afford to purchase an efficient filter, and boiled water is not palatable. In times of drought the supply either fails entirely or is quite insufficient for domestic purposes. As a pure and plentiful supply of water is essential to robust health, I hope that means will be found whereby all may be supplied with good water at a reasonable cost. I am pleased to note that a few rainwater tanks have been constructed according to modern ideas, and are provided with filters.

In the annual report of the Sanitary Inspector you will see that out of the 1870 inhabited houses in the parish no less than 326 were "dirty, damp, or out of repair." This is a large proportion. You will see that 52 at the end of the year were still untouched, whilst four remain from 1895. The white-washing of houses and keeping them dry and weather-proof has an important influence on health, and in some cases I know that serious illness has been caused by neglect in these particulars.

The amount of time spent by the Sanitary Inspector in sending notice after notice to the owners of these properties is very great, and I hope you will insist on these notices being promptly complied with.

In July last my attention was drawn to the sanitary state of Townfield-yard and I made a special report to you; which is appended. The owners were given three months to remedy the defects. I have again inspected the Yard, and find a marked improvement in the majority of the houses. These are cleaner, and in better repair. In the case of No. 42 to 48 the whole row has been thoroughly renovated and I beg to draw your attention to them in order that you may see how many of the defects I pointed out may be remedied.

I consider numbers 5, 7, 9, and 11, are still very unsatisfactory, whilst Nos. 1, 17, and 30, are in such a state that if not repaired and cleansed I shall have to declare them unfit for human habitation.

A matter to which sufficient notice has not been paid is the condition of the paving in many of the courts and alleys of the town. In some cases the stones are so uneven as to be dangerous to walk upon especially on dark evenings (Hearn's Yard) whilst it is impossible to sweep them clean or wash down with water. Consequently they are always in a more or less dirty state, and the soakage of filth between the stones pollutes the air.

*The Epidemic of Measles and Whooping Cough.*—In June last a few cases of measles occurred in the Bellingdon Road. On my instructions the Sanitary Inspector visited and warned the parents of the contagious nature of the disease and for a time the epidemic appeared to be successfully stayed. Then cases appeared in Waterside, and during the school holidays in August the disease increased to such an extent that on the reassembling of the Infant School in Waterside at the beginning of September not fewer than half the children usually in attendance were absent. Next the Infant School in Germain Street was attacked, and on September 22nd the Infant School at Whitehill. In September and October the epidemic raged. Whooping cough also became epidemic at Charteridge, Asheridge and Bellingdon, and the Asheridge School, at which the children from these hamlets attend, was closed for six weeks. This particular outbreak must have been caused by attendance at school, although insufficient precautions as to isolation at home no doubt, had its effect. As

early as June, I wrote to the teachers of the schools asking them to assist in excluding infected scholars, and on September 11th I wrote to managers of Sunday schools inviting their co-operation. On October 3rd leaflets were distributed from house to house, warning parents to isolate children who were attacked, and the managers of Sunday schools were asked to close the infant departments. I believe this had a good effect in diminishing the epidemic. The following schools were entirely closed:—Waterside Infants, Sept. 2nd to Oct. 19th; Germain-street Infants, Sept. 18th to Oct. 9th; Whitehill Infants, Sept. 22nd to Oct. 19th; Ley Hill School, Sept. 28th to Oct. 28th; Hyde Heath School, Oct. 28th to Nov. 28th.

A curious feature was the immunity of the Towns-end-road Schools.

At all the schools many of the older scholars were attacked, and in all, except Towns-end-road, a serious diminution in the attendance was the result. I deemed it inadvisable to close any but the infant schools (Hyde Heath and Ashridge excepted) as there was still a large number of scholars attending, and I considered it too drastic a measure to close schools entirely and deprive children of education for a month or more whilst all the time the staff was being maintained, unless there was a distinct danger to their health. In a town like Chesham, where children mix freely together in the streets and at their homes, the effect of school attendance in spreading an epidemic is of less importance than in a less populous neighbourhood. I availed myself of article 88 of the Education Code, and requested the School Board to exclude only certain infected scholars. I spent a large amount of time in ascertaining the names of these scholars, and compiled numerous lists which were duly forwarded to the Education Department, in order that in apportioning the grant at the end of the school year the absence of these scholars should not cause loss of grant. In dealing with this epidemic I received much assistance from Mr. Culner, the School Attendance Officer. In such an important matter as the health of the children it is very desirable that the Sanitary Authority and the School Board should be in accord. Mr. How, the clerk to the School Board, gave me valuable advice as to legal procedure, and some of the members of the School Board, especially Mr. Patterson (the chairman), also helped me. The lesson to be learned from these epidemics is that it is essential to deal with the first cases in an energetic manner. I would advise that in future on the very first outbreak a special inspector be engaged to watch the cases and prevent the intermixing of persons from infected homes with others; to disinfect all houses that require it; and to instruct parents as to the very contagious nature of the malady.

A small expense would nip the epidemic in the bud, obviate further trouble, and abolish the anxiety to parents and others that such an epidemic entails.

In conclusion, I wish to bear testimony to the conscientious and fearless way in which your Sanitary Inspector, Mr. Gray, performs his by no means pleasant duties, and to thank you for the courtesy and consideration with which you have always treated me, and to hope that in the future, as well as in the past, we may work together for the public good.

Believe me, Gentlemen,

Your obedient servant,

ARTHUR E. LARKING, M.D.

### SANITARY INSPECTOR'S REPORT.

The report of the Sanitary Inspector to the Medical Officer showed that 495 nuisances had formed the subject of notices, being tabulated as follows:—Houses dirty, damp and out of repair, 326; lodging houses cleansed, 4; bakehouses, ditto, 16; slaughter houses, ditto, 8; water closets and drains insufficient, defective or blocked, 67; slopwater drains constructed or repaired, 8; privies cleaned or repaired, 12; privies converted into pail closets or new pail closets constructed, 8; overcrowding, 3; water tanks dirty, 14; animals improperly kept, 7; offensive accumulations, 22. Of these nuisances 435 had been abated and there were 59 still on the books. Of the 26 on the books on 31st December, 1895, 22 had since been abated. There had been 142 notices served, and 121 complied with; one was cancelled by the Council and 21 remained outstanding.

In his remarks attached to the report the Inspector said that four houses still wanted repairing, and 52 wanted cleansing and repairing. Overcrowding had proved very difficult to deal with, owing to the scarcity of houses. The continued drought gave him a chance of having several water tanks cleansed, but in one case the Council would not support him, but let it slide.

